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ABSTRACT

By using a collegial, "power-with" supervisory model that balances both institutional and individual needs, a manager can realize greater success in selecting, motivating, and retaining clerical staffers. Candor, accessibility, recognition, and two-way communication are the hallmarks of this participatory management model, with the goal of releasing human potential and building on the strength of the group, not the leader. Five tools should be in place before the newest staff member is selected: office philosophy, office policies, position descriptions, procedures, and supervisor's guidelines. The supervisors should secure their immediate supervisor's support of the approach to clerical supervision and establish a relationship with the personnel office. Interviewing procedures should be in keeping with the supervisory principles. When the new clerical staffer starts work, the supervisor should set the tone and have private weekly meetings. Throughout the probationary period, the emphasis is on confidence and morale building, along with training. To motivate and retain staffers, the same attitudes and practices should continue--positivism, frequent individual meetings, recognition, and communication. Ways of practicing "power-with" include welcoming suggestions, involving people in decision making, not shirking responsibilities but sharing some, and creating optimum working conditions. (YLB)

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Clerical Staffers in an Academic Office

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Abstract

Thirty-four percent of all working women hold clerical jobs. They are often underpaid and under-appreciated -- as well as underutilized. However, by employing a collegial, "power-with" supervisory model which balances both institutional and individual needs, a manager can realize greater success in selecting, motivating and retaining clerical staffers. Job satisfaction is enhanced because workers participate in decisions affecting them and are recognized for their expertise and contributions to what has become a team effort.

Drawing on observation, experience and the literature of educational administration and supervision, the author details the principles of collegial supervision from interviewing and hiring the newest staff member through motivating and retaining all staffers. Candor, accessibility, recognition and two-way communication are the hallmarks of this participatory management model, with the goal of releasing human potential: building on the strength of the group instead of the leader.

A Collegial Model for Supervising
Clerical Staffers in an Academic Office

As daily events and movements for reform repeatedly make clear, the lot of working women warrants dramatic improvement. Pick a problem area, from unemployment to underemployment -- including ageism; displaced homemakers; sexual harassment; watering down of affirmative action requirements; unequal pay for comparable worth; pervasiveness of the old boy system; insensitive men, and women, managers . . .

See? It's hard to decide which reality is most distasteful (and most wasteful). It's hard to identify which group of working women to target first for attention, for consideration, for help.

A nomination: Attention must be paid to women in clerical jobs, who comprise 34% of their sex's work force.¹ As Karen Nussbaum points out,

. . . clerical work is the largest and fastest growing sector of the workforce. Yet, despite its importance to the economy, such work is characterized by low pay, little promotional opportunity, and a lack of day-to-day respect ²

Convinced that clerical workers in general are shamefully put upon (almost as if their very numbers make them dispensable, or interchangeable) and based on reading, observation and experience, I've described here a collegial, or "power-with," generic model for selecting, motivating and retaining clerical staffers.

Derived mostly from principles of educational administration, these approaches are applicable anywhere that managers/administrators believe in positive human relations. The supervisor who would find this model useful probably already shares power, communicates well, appreciates the clerical staffers s/he works with. However, the specific suggestions here, with support from the literature of supervision, may both strengthen that person's belief and add to her/his repertoire.

First, a few delimitations. "Clerical workers" will refer to those women not classed in the professional ranks wherever they work; for personnel purposes they are non-exempt employees. While some clerical staffers -- executive secretaries, administrative assistants, call them what you will -- enjoy status and possibly even decent pay -- references in this article are to the great majority of clerical workers whose status was summarized earlier. Finally, for the most part, clerical work truly is women's work (one reason for the low salaries), and so to employ "he or she" in reference to clerical staffers throughout this article would be straining after a nonexistent egalitarianism. So, "she" it will be.

A central concept, the "power-with" approach to leadership, should be defined early. First articulated by Kimball Wiles,³ "power-with" is the positive antithesis of "power-over." As the wording suggests, a power-over leader is self-protective, authoritarian, hierarchical, unilateral, directive, punitive. Participatory management is unknown -- or feared -- for the power-over leader has no intention of "releasing the human potential" of the group.

In contrast, the power-with leader concentrates on building group power, not personal authority. Strengthening the group includes soliciting and implementing ideas; using two-way communication; sharing decision-making.

Involving the group promotes members' commitment to mutually determined goals and offers the best chance for releasing the full potential of a staff. What else is supervisory management all about?

Say Wiles and Lovell:

The evidence is clear. The style of leadership defined variously as democratic, indirect, initiating structure and consideration is more likely to be associated with "superior" group achievement and group maintenance.⁴

Belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every other human being . . . knowledge that any office is only as effective as its lowest-ranking clerical worker . . . conviction of the basic practicality of balancing institutional with personal needs: For whatever reason, the supervisor hoping to succeed and advance will work out a principled personnel philosophy. Here is one such plan. Addressed to "you" -- whatever supervisor reads it -- the suggestions may sound prescriptive. But if you adopt them, you can also adapt them.

I. Selecting a staff member

Supervising a clerical office staff of 1 or 20 involves the same tenets. However, before the newest staff member is selected and starts her job, five tools should be in place -- if the supervisor is lucky.

Office philosophy. This statement serves to remind the veteran and tell the newcomer of the office climate and the group's approach to tasks (e.g., team work and cross-training . . .).

Office policies. General statements with rules and regulations will help the newcomer to know the groundrules for major office responsibilities

as well as nitty-gritty, but crucial, things like how vacation requests are decided; who assigns work; when work breaks are taken; whether selling or collecting is permissible on office time.

Position descriptions. Everyone in an office appreciates having an official job description. It adds dignity to the role, prioritizes duties, give both supervisor and staffer a reference point.

Procedures. Certainly, the new staff member will be trained. She'll hear and do a lot. However, written procedures, describing what she's learning, allow her another learning modality and something to refer to for reinforcement or clarification between oral instructions.

Supervisor's guidelines. It's extremely useful to have or develop notes on such things as working with the central personnel office (who does what, and when); interviewing job candidates (questions to ask, kinds of people to seek); training sequence during the probationary period.

The first four aid_s just described might be kept together in a staff manual, with a copy for every staff member. That way -- no secrets and easy reference. All four things should be revised at regular intervals; no job description should stay the same indefinitely, and procedures for doing things can always be improved. Reconsideration and revision: Here's the supervisor's chance to involve staffers in a collegial activity dealing with matters that affect them every day. And, joint revision of philosophy, policies, procedures and job descriptions will foster everyone's buying into these documents, feeling an ownership and a commitment.⁵

Two more preliminaries are necessary before you, the supervisor, start working with (and for) a prospective staff member.

- * Secure your immediate supervisor's agreement with and support of your approach to clerical supervision. Your workings with the staff will take time and require a united front; insist on both elements. Otherwise, sensing a difference in priorities or philosophy, staff members might play off one supervisor against the other.

Make sure the responsibilities of all supervisors in your area are clearly differentiated and spelled out -- to them and others. The chain of command should be clear to all; and a chart of organization is one good, graphic way to achieve this. Your effectiveness is threatened if staff members bypass you at will to do business with your supervisor.⁶ (A manager who has truly dealt with you in a power-with way won't let this happen, for the full responsibility of clerical supervision will have been delegated to you.) Communicate regularly and frankly on significant personnel matters with the person to whom you report. Assume s/he wants to know what's happening.

- * Establish a relationship with the central personnel office, presumably the unit which advertises for and screens candidates for clerical positions with you. Be sure you know exactly what people there do, in contrast to what you do; avoid duplication of effort by recognizing where one office's function ends and the other's begins. And keep communicating, no matter what stage you've reached. Knowing particulars about your office can help personnel people piece together a global picture; their feedback and information sharing can help you out. It's a mutually beneficial -- and just plain smart -- relationship.

Now back to you . . . and your job candidate.

Only interviewing practice will increase your ability to "read" people; to know what questions to ask or avoid; to get important things said, for the record; to sense when to cut the meeting short because the applicant is just not right. Before you start interviewing, know your organization's general guidelines and means of affirmative action implementation; the applicant's rights (e.g., not to be asked her age or plans for a family); your own goals. On one page, prepare a list of the questions you want to be sure to ask, and have a job description copy on hand if you conclude the candidate is a strong one, ready for the "think it over and get back to me (or central personnel)" step.

Interviewing procedures abound in the literature, but to be in keeping with the supervisory principles to be presented here, you should

- * be warm and personable, trying to put the applicant -- who's on your turf -- at ease.
- * present a clear description of the position to be filled, after a brief overview of the office's responsibilities and the staffers already there.
- * mention any policies and expectations the candidate should know about in considering the position -- e.g., a no-smoking rule; a need for the person to fit in with X number of other staffers.
- * be up front about performance expectations and what you hope are reasonable rewards for quality work.
- * avoid detailing specifics on salary and benefits if the central personnel office customarily handles those areas.
- * invite questions.

When she leaves, the applicant should know generally how you feel about her as a candidate and the time frame for filling the vacancy.

After the interview, tap the expertise of a personnel officer. Since s/he probably screened the candidate, you can exchange reactions and raise doubts or questions. Remind that person of any agreements made between you and the applicant, such as a call within three days if she's interested in the position. While the personnel representative should not make the hiring decision, s/he can be an invaluable ally to you, starting at this early stage of staffing. Request and practice regular two-way communication.

So now you have a new clerical staffer -- let's call her Sue New. Make her first day a tone-setting, overview occasion. You'll have plenty of time during her probationary period to introduce new information, to clarify. So . . . don't boggle her mind.

Instead, meeting privately with her and recognizing possible nervousness, extend a sincere welcome and tell her your hopes for her and the rest of your office team. Give her survival information and materials for the day -- basic office groundrules; phone-answering procedure; lunch time; bathroom and food locations; names of other staffers, possibly with a small seating chart she can refer to on her own. Give her a desk key and a personalized staff manual; introduce her to her co-workers.

Depending on your set up, walk her around your floor of the building, indicating generally what's where. (Later during that first week, you can repeat the "tour," introducing as you go.) Then she's had enough, and she'd probably welcome the chance to sit down and start some work. That could be a clear-cut activity, a welcome relief from the emotional tumult she could be feeling at so many new things and people.

In the next number of days, Sue will get used to the patterns and routines of the office. She'll get a handle on names and basic procedures.

And she'll know from you, and see, that you're there to help.

Once a week, have an official (but not solemn) meeting with her. Use the occasion to discuss her progress (be long and loud on anything you can genuinely praise), answer questions, judge how she's feeling about things. Sue should know it's just as necessary for her to evaluate the job and setting as it is for those there to assess her during this (two-way) probationary period.

This private weekly meeting lets you judge how Sue feels about her colleagues and whether her training is progressing at a reasonable pace. It's a good time to clear up misconceptions, to spur her on to greater effort -- and, through personally self-disclosing moments and expressions of real interest in Sue's life beyond the office, to demonstrate you're a real person too.

Keep brief notes on these weekly meetings, and in fact, on anything else of consequence involving Sue during her probationary period. If she's as good as you hope, your notes will help in any "recommended for hire" form you'll have to complete. If in spite of all your efforts (yet to be described), she's not right for the job, you'll have running documentation.

Other things you as a supervisor can do to make Sue feel like a team member include officially welcoming her at the first staff meeting; mentioning her arrival in any office reports or publications leaving the office; writing her notes of appreciation.

Notes to staffers: a separate and major matter. A brief written acknowledgement of an achievement or an attitude can be both spirit booster and reinforcer.⁷ It tells Sue that you're aware and appreciative -- and that you take the extra step to let her know. One way to handle such

a note: Leave it in a sealed envelope on Sue's desk with her name and a "confidential" stamp. That's her copy. File yours. Make another copy for any other office supervisor and for files in that central personnel office. Sue will know you mean (positive) business!

Though often intangible, recognition is considered a top motivator. Herzberg theorized that its presence increases job satisfaction,⁸ and more current authors detail ways that recognition can become increasingly important to workers.⁹ Unlike primary rewards, which satisfy physiological needs, the secondary reward of recognition is an acquired, or learned, reinforcer. Workers learn to value recognition as they see it given to their colleagues, and the more they experience it, the more they desire it. Once involved with a positive pattern of recognition, people cannot get too much of it.

Throughout the probationary period, the emphasis is on confidence and morale building, along with training. Positivism; two-way communication; supervisor accessibility and power-with approach; individual recognition . . . these are the attitudes and behaviors that work -- if any will!

Any end-of-probation report, like any evaluation, should be reviewed privately with Sue, to make sure she understands and agrees with what's been written. She gets a copy of the final version, which probably goes to the central personnel office. (Hopefully, the emphasis was positive; there should be little to quibble over. And any recommendations for areas to improve come right from your records of talks with Sue. Even then, to let her save face, these could be worded like "Sue agrees that she needs to . . . and she has already begun to")

The end of the probationary period is not the end of supervision, for you and Sue have agreed that there's always learning and refinement possible. You encourage her to maintain the candid manner you've encouraged and practiced, indicating that you'll still meet at regular intervals.

And then, a ceremony marking the end of probation (for Sue, for the office) and the beginning of what's hoped will be a long relationship. Time and means differ, but any (and all) of the following forms of recognition effectively welcome a new permanent staffer:

- * Present her with an office door key. When she can let herself in, she really has arrived.
- * Have a nameplate ready for her desk: A "regular" deserves that.
- * Publicize her permanent status in internal publications.
- * Take her to lunch.

II. Motivating and retaining staffers

The probationary period over, life goes on. Hopefully, Sue has adopted the team spirit and other values you've fostered among staff members. She knows the office is a responsible and busy one, that her achievements are recognized to the extent they can be, that as supervisor, you're candid, even-handed, helpful and appreciative.

With a permanent staff in place, the supervisor's on-going challenge can be stated in this question: How do I prompt each person to want to stay in this office and keep getting better at what she does?

In part, the answer involves continuing the same attitudes and practices already mentioned -- positivism; weekly or frequent individual

meetings; recognition notes; communication. In addition, other principles -- familiar from the literature of management and supervision -- are worth detailing.

For starters, look at that question again. Notice how it implies the existence of individual and institutional needs. As a primary guideline, you as supervisor must balance the two.¹⁰ For instance, certainly Sue New should take the vacation time or personal days she's got coming -- but not at periods of peak office activity, when her absence would force others, already under extra pressure, to cover for her. That's just not fair, and you've got to call it. Here's where your practice of candor and your team-building efforts provide a rationale and a precedent.

Get to know staffers personally; life should not (and can not) be divorced from work, as long as each is kept in proportion. There's that balance again. As supervisor, you're in the best position to help build each staffer's self-concept. Do so, first by accentuating the positive¹¹ and second, by practicing what's been called "positive discipline"¹² -- education and training, rather than enforcement and punishment. Good supervisory leadership promotes staff members' sense of personal responsibility.

However much you may be a McGregor Theory Y manager, aiming to facilitate workers' reaching what Maslow called the self-actualization stage, you're going to have to make corrections and criticisms. Good people will want to know of errors and deficiencies, and bad ones will need to know. A few suggestions: (1) don't draw conclusions; ask questions. Let the staff member explain her perception of things;¹³ (2) when improvement's needed, aim for her agreement and plan jointly how to achieve it; (3) always criticize privately; that's a sign of

respect and a face-saving means; (4) avoid major criticisms or confrontations on Fridays to save the staffer, and you, from stewing all weekend; (5) keep brief notes on meetings; on less-than-desirable attitude and behavior patterns -- just as you keep copies of complimentary notes. Remember, the staff member builds her own record; you merely record it. And it's always good to have documentation, especially if you never need to use it.

Collegiality . . . participatory governance . . . what does this mean for clerical workers? It could mean the difference between their job satisfaction or lack of it. A simple example, while yet a telling sign of an outlook: Avoid "I" talk -- Say "We did that" and "The staff decided . . ." instead of "My office staff worked hard" and "Call my secretary." A we-oriented supervisor concentrates on building a team, not a hierarchy.¹⁴ It does start at the top.¹⁵

Another example: Welcome suggestions. But do more than that: Give them serious consideration and if they're implemented, give credit. All that, in turn, leads to more suggestions.

Those who do the work are often the best judges of how to do it better. They know where the drudgery enters in; they know where the computer program must be modified. Ask them to help write procedures and revise office forms; brainstorm how to handle an on-line situation; suggest placement for machines and furniture they'll use. Regular staff meetings can provide a forum for two-way communication, which in turn fosters a team spirit.

As another major way of practicing "power-with," rather than "power-over," involve people in decisions affecting them. What may

sound like standard operating procedure for some supervisors is an alien -- and threatening -- concept to others. Yet what could be more reasonable than seeking staff consensus on an office no-smoking policy; working together on an overtime schedule; involving those who will sit on them in replacement of desk chairs and those who will use it in the purchase of an electronic typewriter? Though staff members have a zone of acceptance for the decisions that managers should make, they may also pass the "tests" of relevance and expertise that Bridges suggests qualifies them to be involved in still other decisions.¹⁶

"Power-with," or collegiality, is not a supervisor's shirking her/his responsibilities. Rather, it is recognizing that in the areas where "power" can be shared, the group is stronger and smarter than the individual. And feeling more involved, the group is then also more committed.

However, it's important that you specify what you can share (and feel comfortable sharing); that what is shared is meaningful, not simply what you don't care about. As necessary, make clear whether staffers are recommending or deciding.¹⁷ Again, candor is the key.

An uncomfortable chair does not seem like a major calamity; neither does stuffy air or a few ringing telephones. But put an office worker in a bad chair in a noisy, stuffy office, require that worker to perform a dead-end job for low pay on a video display terminal with a dirty screen made worse by the harsh glare from fluorescent lights, add a dash of pressure -- a ruthless supervisor, for example, or economic pressures or family problems -- and you've got an explosive situation, the stuff from which headaches and heart attacks are made.¹⁸

As a supervisor, you're responsible for creating optimum working conditions for clerical staffers. Of course, your efforts could be

limited by budgetary constraints and your institution's awareness and sensitivity. But look around. Even with limited money and other support, you can add color, plants, music and a sense of organization. All these can contribute to the work climate.¹⁹ So too can your seeing that chair heights are adjusted to people's needs; that however the office is laid out, desks are thoughtfully positioned and a staff lounge is provided for some semblance of privacy.

"For the health and morale of the employees, adequate control of air, color, light, and noise should . . . be considered."²⁰ Though that generalization comes from a word processing textbook chapter on environment, it more and more applies to all office staffers. Witness the emergence of the ergonomist, an engineer/psychologist or psychologist/engineer who studies "designing products based on the way people think and move, so that the user . . . can work safely, efficiently and comfortably."²¹ And photobiology, the "study of the health effects of lighting."²²

These potentially corrective fields, and others, are responses to needs . . . and fears. Although video display terminals -- VDTs -- were recently cleared of charges they cause eye disease and cataracts,²³ complaints of visual fatigue continue, and VDT manufacturers have suggested how employers can minimize related negative environmental conditions, such as glare. One clerical workers' union spokesperson is clearly not alone in her contention that "Automation is producing the sweatshops of the 80's."²⁴

In short, offices should be designed for people, for as Cross notes, ". . . top management must realize that the automated machinery is here, but what makes it all work is the people."²⁵ Further, a number of writers and a smattering of companies support the concept of employee participation

in office design and planning.²⁶ If involving people in decisions affecting them is a basic supervisory principle, what better occasion than when their own work environment is concerned? Says one interior architect, "Human satisfaction with an environment generates an enormous, if incalculable, benefit to a company's operations."²⁷

Over-communication is impossible. Or so it must seem to the clerical staffer who waits weeks for a supervisor's response to her written vacation request; or who finds out in the middle of it that yesterday's procedure has been reversed today; or who plans a joint activity with a co-worker tomorrow to learn only then that her colleague is off, and only the supervisor knew. It's so easy to exchange information -- a five-minute preview each morning, staff bulletin board notices, a weekly flyer No one deserves to operate in ignorance, from edict to edict. The supervisor must facilitate regular two-way communication, for members of any team should be the first to learn what's happening of concern to them.²⁸

"As time goes by," get regular readings on each staff member's feelings about her jobs and the office: Is she ambitious? Does she show initiative? What systems has she worked out? Is she doing her job or her job-plus? Respond according to what you're told and perceive: Allow more autonomy with aspects of her job; add to her responsibilities and her remuneration, if possible; encourage her to learn parts of other's roles. Nurture curiosity and eagerness. Recognize achievement -- often and unstintingly.

Ah, recognition. It keeps being re-discovered as a primary motivator. Surprising, considering the number of motivational theories that involve recognition or some synonym. Techniques already alluded to include

complimentary notes to staffers, copied to others; publicity of staff members' advancements and achievements; and some kind of welcome award marking the successful completion of a probationary period. Introduction of staff members to those in the institutional power structure, with references to staffers' specialties and contributions, is yet another means of recognition. "Award experiences" can be structured and should be institutionally sanctioned for maximum positive effect.²⁹

It's been said that so much of supervision is common sense. It's "releasing human potential." It's practicing the Golden Rule. But a supervisor must operate on such principles in a consistent way -- if s/he's to have credibility. Example: It's not enough to engage a clerical staff member in conversation about her weekend or her car . . . if that kind of human discourse is not a regular and sincere thing. If the weekend, the car, the sick child, the hobby . . . won't be mentioned again till it's convenient for the supervisor (who has erroneously chalked up a "took an interest in . . ." point for her/himself) -- or worse, if when the staffer raises the subject again the supervisor is blank or unresponsive -- it's preferable to skip any pretense of familiarity.

Similarly, the supervisor who doesn't need (or, more likely, doesn't get) feedback and reinforcement from the next supervisor up . . . is unlikely to give it.³⁰ Such a person would not be reading, or understanding, this article. So, yes, positive supervision may be common sense -- but sometimes that's not too common. It depends on an individual's wholeness, training, experience -- and then on a principled commitment to be a certain kind of supervisor. Such consistency of managerial behavior, coupled of course with the flexibility to adapt and react to crises, is sure to favorably dispose a new clerical staffer and help retain and motivate veterans.

FOOTNOTES

¹Andree Brooks, "For the Woman: Strides and Snags," The New York Times, 16 Oct. 1983, Sec. 12, p. 31.

²Joel Makower, Office Hazards: How Your Job Can Make You Sick (Washington: Tilden Press, 1981), ix.

³Kimball Wiles and John T. Lovell, Supervision for Better Schools, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 70.

⁴Ibid., p. 65.

⁵Ibid., p. 211; and Ron Zemke, "What are high-achieving managers really like?" Training, Feb. 1979, p. 35; and "The New Industrial Relations," Business Week, 11 May 1981, p. 94.

⁶Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., pp. 79 and 189.

⁷David J. Cherrington and B. Jackson Wixom Jr., "Recognition is still a top motivator," Personnel Administrator, May 1983, p. 87.

⁸Wayne K. Hoy and Cecil G. Miskel, Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 102.

⁹Cherrington and Wixom, op. cit., p. 88.

¹⁰Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., p. 45; and Hoy and Miskel, op. cit., p. 201; and Zemke, op. cit., p. 36

¹¹Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., p. 56.

¹²Don Caruth, Bill Middlebrook and Trezzie A. Pressley, "This matter of discipline," Supervisory Management, April 1983, p. 24.

¹³Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁴Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., pp. 76 and 90.

¹⁵"The New Industrial Relations," op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁶Hoy and Miskel, op. cit., p. 229.

¹⁷Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., p. 80.

¹⁸Makower, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁹"Greenery," The New Yorker, 1 Aug. 1983, pp. 26, 27.

²⁰Mona Casady, Word Processing Concepts (Cincinnati: South-Western Publishing Co., 1980), p. 141.

²¹Victoria Balfour, "For a Happier Life With the Computer," The New York Times, 27 March 1983, Sec. 12, p. 24.

²²Makower, op. cit., p. 71.

²³"Screen Test: Discounting VDT hazards," Time, 25 July 1983, p. 61.

²⁴Brooks, loc. cit.

²⁵Burt D. Cross, "The Changing Office of Today," College and University, Spring 1983, p. 271.

²⁶David W. Dunlap, "Making the Best Use of New Office Space," The New York Times, 5 June 1983, Sec. 8, p. 14; and Makower, op. cit., p. 64.

²⁷Dunlap, loc. cit.

²⁸Wiles and Lovell, op. cit., pp. 45 and 80.

²⁹Cherrington and Wixom, op. cit., pp. 90, 91.

³⁰Zemke, loc. cit.

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